

The Legalities of Linking

Links do not convey endorsement

by **Jennifer Kyrnin** Updated on March 08, 2020

alengo / Getty Images

Any discussion about the legal ramifications of linking externally must begin with clarifying what a link is — and what it is not.

A link on a website is a connection between your [web page](#) and some other document on the internet. Links are meant to be references to other sources of information.

According to the [World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\)](#), a link is *not*:

- an endorsement of the linked page
- an implication that the linked page is created by the developers of the page linking it
- an indication that the linked page is part of the originating document

Typically, when you link from one page to another, the new page opens in a new window, or the old page is deleted from the current window and replaced with the new page.

The Contents of the Link Contains the Meaning

The physical act of writing an [HTML link](#) does not convey any endorsement, authorship, or ownership. Instead, it's the contents within the link that imply those things.

Endorsement: "Joe's [link page](#) is really cool!"

Implied ownership: "The article I wrote on [CSS](#) should explain this issue."

Web Links and the Law

Because the act of linking to a site does not imply ownership or endorsement, you do not need to ask permission to link to a site that is publicly accessible. For example, if you found a site's URL through a search engine, then linking to it shouldn't have legal ramifications. There have been one or two cases in the U.S. that implied that the act of linking without permission is legally actionable, but these have been overturned every time.

What you need to be careful of is what you say in and around your link. For example, if you write something denigrating about the linked site, the site owner could sue you for libel.

A possibly libelous link: [Sue](#) said things that were vicious, cruel, and complete lies. In this case, the issue is that you said things that could be libelous, and you made it easy to identify who you were talking about through the link.

What Do People Complain About?

If you're going to link to sites outside your own, you should be aware of the most common issues that site owners complain about with links:

Deep linking. Many site owners would rather that customers come to their home pages and traverse their sites from there. Some even have usage policies that disallow the use of deep links. Some also have scripts to prevent deep links or redirect them to their home pages.

Links with advertising. Some companies set up interstitial ads that appear between when a link is clicked and when the reader reaches the destination site. This is less likely to annoy the linked company and more likely to annoy readers.

Embedded content linking. This is most often done with either [iframes](#) or framesets — and most companies do not allow their content to be framed in such a way that it looks like someone else owns the content. If you're going to do that, you should be very aware that this annoys people. Furthermore, if you're not willing to remove the content in an iframe or the frameset around the linked page, you may be risking a lawsuit.

Framing Content

Using HTML frames to surround linked content is a completely different matter. For an example of this, click on this [link to the W3C](#) about link myths. Some companies have successfully sued to have their pages removed from these frames because it can make some readers believe that the linked page is actually a part of the originating site, and possibly owned or authored by that same site. But, in most cases, if the owner of a linked site objects to the frame and it's removed, there isn't any legal recourse.

Iframes are even more problematic. It's very easy to include someone else's site in your content pages with an iframe. It's a lot like using someone else's image without permission. Putting their content in an iframe makes it look like you wrote the content, and that can generate a lawsuit.

Linking Recommendations

The best rule of thumb is to avoid linking to sites in a fashion that you would find annoying. If you have questions about whether you can or should link to something, simply ask the owner of the content — and never link to items that you've agreed not to link to.